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Utah: The canyon country of 127 Hours

I leant over the lip of the sandstone precipice and cursed the adrenalin surge that was making my legs tremble. After all, this was supposed to be an abseil for beginners.

Valoree, a bespectacled 50 year-old from Arkansas, had already glided down the sheer, 60ft cliff just beyond Zion National Park in Utah. Her friend, Nicolas, a smoker from Sweden in his mid-forties, had positively powered down.

Then Alastair, a Telegraph video journalist, decided to choose that day to overcome a lifelong fear of heights and ease his way down. Our guide, Hank calves of steel Moon, was now waiting only for me. As I contemplated the overhang, I recalled reading how a man called Aron Ralston had once abseiled down a similar height. His circumstances, I reminded myself, were slightly more challenging than mine. Half-starved, with a raging thirst, he had managed a descent using just one hand, a makeshift sling protecting a bloodied stump where his right arm used to be.

And so I leant back into thin air. Feeding rope through the cantilever, I lowered myself, unsteadily at first, then more gracefully as my legs finally found a use for the adrenalin and bounced me down to terra firma and the others in the gully below.

Ralston was, indirectly, the reason I found myself stepping off cliff faces in Utah. This was canyoning, a mixture of hiking, climbing and abseiling, a novices experience of the sport that Ralston was enjoying on a glorious spring day in 2003. As he was traversing Blue John Canyon on the edge of Canyonlands National Park in south-eastern Utah, he dislodged a half-ton boulder, which fell and pinned his right arm against the canyon wall.

Read about Aron Ralston's extraordinary story of survival

After five tortured days, with no one knowing where he was and all other options exhausted, he cut off his lower right arm with a blunt multi-tool penknife. He then hiked several miles including the 65ft abseil before being picked up by a rescue helicopter.

Now Danny Boyle, in his first film since Slumdog Millionaire, has turned this extraordinary tale into a film, 127 Hours (released in Britain earlier this week). Starring James Franco, who has been nominated for a Golden Globe award, as Ralston, it is a compelling, sometimes grisly, retelling of a remarkable escape and its redemptive effect on the protagonist.

Utah: a view from 127 Hours screenwriter, Simon Beaufoy

The film also exhibits Utah in unbridled glory: panoramic shots linger on the patterns, shapes and rainbow hues of the states canyon lands. The cinematography and the films breathless sense of adventure arguably make it the biggest publicity bonanza for the area since John Ford shot Stagecoach in Monument Valley no mean feat for a film with an amputation scene.

In fact, 127 Hours is just the latest in a line of films stretching from Stagecoach to Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid and Forrest Gump that use Utah as a backdrop. (Cultural note: dont mistake a Utah scene for Arizona. Three times I heard of Thelma and Louise being filmed in Utah; three times I heard the teller lamenting the appearance of an Arizona traffic cop on a Utah road).



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Book extract: read Aron Ralston's account of his escape from Blue John Canyon

While few visitors would care to chase the physical demands and risks of Ralston's approach, there are less taxing routes to adventure. Our foray into canyoning was within an hour's drive of civilisation, conducted under the eye of an expert a small taster of what Ralston did on his own, almost on a whim, in the middle of nowhere.

In our week-long whistle-stop tour, the closest we got to the physical canyon environment although not the isolation of Ralston's ordeal was near the town of Page, across the Arizona border.

While Ralston biked and walked to Blue John, I was taken in a 4WD convoy right to the mouth of the upper Antelope Canyon, one of the most popular and accessible slot canyons in the south-western United States. Our Navajo guide shepherded us along a procession of photo opportunities within the natural stone corridor, directing our cameras towards different shapes and patterns in the smooth sandstone.

Then desert rain began to fall. Water cascaded off the sheer canyon walls, puddles becoming pools within seconds. As we scurried back to the shelter of the vehicle, a waterfall was already tumbling by the canyon entrance. Then, as the downpour stopped, and the cascades ebbed then died, we half-wondered if we had imagined it all.

In a way, the downpour was serendipitous, like a live geology lesson demonstrating the origins of the sinuous canyon. Flash floods have chiselled and smoothed the rock here and occasionally claimed human lives. A dream sequence in *127 Hours* hints at the real danger posed by heavy rainfall in this arid land.

With or without the rain, few places on the planet show the Earth's elemental shifts as dramatically as here. Topography can define a visit here, the areas extraordinary shapes tempting even unscientific journalists into amateur geology.

We hiked to see Delicate Arch, the free-standing arch that is a symbol of the state (once a sandstone fin eroded by weather and water); trekked in mighty Zion National Park, where a bighorn sheep stood at the roadside welcoming us to the parks towering gorges (erosion by a tributary of the Colorado River); and drove through the familiar formations of Monument Valley (where the red colour comes from iron oxide in the siltstone).

Watch the trailer for *'127 Hours'* Geological complexities were explained many times during our visit, with varying degrees of success. Perhaps the best explanation came from a ranger in Arches National Park, flexing a washing-up sponge with judicious slits and colourings to illustrate the forces that pushed salt layers up and cracked the land around.

I also discovered that this is a place where all 13 periods of geological time scale are represented in the rock layers (the Grand Canyon shows only seven); where you can stop the car if you're with someone in the know and see allosaurus footprints fossilised in the rock near your tyres.

Of all the geological masterpieces we saw, for me the greatest was Bryce Canyon National Park. In *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, his highly readable book about his accident and his life leading up to it, Ralston traces his love of canyons back to a family outing there.



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Despite reading this account, and seeing photographs, I was still unprepared. Words caught in my throat when I broached a viewpoint. The 300ft canyon plunged below, peopled with myriad, sentinel-like pink and orange sandstone towers rising from the floor a field of hoodoos, formed by cycles of freeze and thaw, whose freakish beauty stopped me short.

Ralston, whose enthusiasm for adventure was undimmed even after what he calls his farewell to arm, also wrote evocatively of the extraordinary natural forces at work. This is his description of a visit to a hoodoo site known as the Dolls House in Canyonlands: The features and formative processes of the desert made me pause I had the unexpected feeling that I was watching the ongoing birth of an entire landscape, as if I were standing on the rim of an exploding caldera. The vista held for me a feeling of the dawn of time, that primordial epoch before life when there was only desolate land. After a week travelling near the place where his life changed for ever, I knew what he meant. Adrenalin may cloud the sensation when you are steeling yourself for an abseil descent although that comes with its own rewards. But stand at the lip of Bryce Canyon, and, if you can, wander away from the crowds into the amphitheatre below. Then you will understand.

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